Interview with Lawrence A. Pezzulo

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR LAWRENCE A. PEZZULO

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Q: Larry, you spent most of your career in Latin America, and it seems logical to me that we focus on that for this interview. I'll have some questions, but obviously whatever you think happened to you in your experiences that are important to put on the record, do so. You don't have to follow my lead. I'll simply introduce any thoughts that have come to me; but you were there and doing it, so that's the important thing.

As a backdrop for talking about Latin America, I wondered if you had any general comments about the kind of relationship the U.S. has with Central and South America, that sets the stage and creates the pressures for people like yourself working in that area. Certainly, it's a unique relationship.

PEZZULO: Well, indeed it is, and I think it grows out of a series of historic realities, the first being that we're both, sort of, transplants—or the ruling elites in both hemispheres—are transplants from Europe. Most of the people in the United States came from Northern or Southern Europe, and naturally most of the people in Latin America came from the Iberian Peninsula.

The timing was not too different, either. The Spanish arrived a little earlier than—or developed the area a little earlier than the Northerners—the Northern Europeans.

The type of colonization was different; it was more exploitative in the south, and more communal and developmental in the north—the United States.

But there were historical contacts then. You find such things as their liberator becoming a great admirer of Washington—Bolivar—looking upon Washington as a liberator, because he—as Washington—saw the mother countries were not serving the new colonies that had a life of their own.

And over the years, even if you look at American diplomatic history, some of our earliest pronouncements were about this hemisphere: the Monroe Doctrine, the shipping-commercial ties were more intimate with the Caribbean and Central American, less so with South America. As time went on, the social ties became stronger; the immigration was mostly south to north. The educational ties went both ways; people coming up from South and Central America to the United States.

So you have a series of things: the historical similarities; the colonial periods we both went though; the breaking away from colonial periods; the growth into individual countries; and all these social, economic, and political ties. Those are similar, and I think the Latins feel them as much as we do. And you feel them once you start working in Latin America. There's a tendency to feel comfortable with Latins, even when they might have animosities or reasons to feel critical of the United States.

The differences are pronounced, too. We became a success story. And like any success story, there's a certain amount of admiration for it, and jealousy. So you get this love-hate relationship.

Q: But as a diplomat working in Latin America, did you feel that the American body politic, generally, was much more involved with your area than might have been the case, let's say, with Europe or Asia in general?

PEZZULO: The amount of American investment, business connection, and so on is intense. I don't know if it's any more intense than you find in some European countries, but it's of a different nature, and it does affect the attitudes of people on both sides of this line we're drawing here, in the way they relate to one another. It's a unique—I think it's been called that—a unique relationship, and indeed, it is, and it's different, depending upon the countries you're in.

You'll find in the southern cone in South America, especially on the eastern side—countries like Argentina, Uruguay—they have never developed that closeness with the United States, basically because they've always felt closer to Europe. And if you go to Argentina, you'd find that the Argentine middle-class family, if they have the resources to send their child to a university outside the country, will send them to Italy, or France, or England. That would never happen in most of your other Latin American countries. If they have the resources, they send them up to a U.S. university. So that's sort of a unique little area whose roots and intellectual ties are more in Europe.

Q: You were ambassador in Uruguay. That was your first experience at that level of policy making in this country toward a Latin America country, although you must have seen it from other levels and other perspectives earlier. I wonder how that impressed you. You had, for example, this problem of the withholding of American military aid, because of the way the Uruguayans were treating human rights in their efforts to get at the leftists in the country. Did this cause you serious problems in your job—the fact that there was this split back in Washington?

PEZZULO: Well, it was the issue, and it had grown out of the decision by the Congress just two years before I went there. Congress really took the initiative in cutting off military assistance to Uruguay.

Q: When was it that you went down?

PEZZULO: I went down in 1977, and Congress cut aid to Uruguay in 1976, one year before. There was an amendment by a future mayor of a northeastern city, called Koch, who took the initiative on this issue, and curtailed military assistance to Uruguay.

When I got there, there were a series of issues to be faced. First of all, the Uruguayan military felt very aggrieved; they felt that the United States had misunderstood them, had dealt arbitrarily with them. They were quite bitter and made no bones of it.

Q: They told you this, I suppose?

PEZZULO: Absolutely. My first meeting was with the three Service Commanders; they had a triumvirate running the government, and we spent three and a half hours, they professing that the United States didn't understand Communism, and didn't understand the problems they had, and had abandoned them in their hour of need; and my saying to them, “You're exaggerating. If you went back and looked at what we did over the years with you, you'd know that's not true. I'm surprised you're saying that. And furthermore, what you're doing now puts our whole relationship in jeopardy, because you've taken arbitrary action against your citizens, and I'm not even questioning whether they deserve it or not. But world opinion is against you and our relationship is hostage to actions you've taken.” So that's how we began. The day I arrived.

And human rights became the central issue. It was interesting. When I got there, there was a lot of mythology as to what had happened in Uruguay, in the State Department's own recollection of events. I set about to try to get the facts. I had my political officers, and my

station, and the military officers, spend full time. I said, “I want to know the history. Let's look back at what happened, and turn it over stone by stone.”

Q: The history of how the government had handled the guerrilla movement?

PEZZULO: Yes, that's right. And what emerged was interesting, if you have the time for it. Because what had happened was this. Uruguay was a traditional, and one of the most longstanding democracies in Latin America, in fact one of the models. Uruguay, Chile, Columbia—those were the models of Latin American democracy. Along about the middle of 1950-60, they suffered a real decline, economically. Uruguay had always been an exporter of meats, hides, products of that nature. World War II was one of the big heydays. Then there was a slump. The Korean War was another big heyday. And then it slumped again. And unfortunately they had not diversified their economy enough, so this slump really hit, and it kept going down.

And what happened—it's a very small country, very middle-class—the young people—professionals—accountants, lawyers, doctors—professionals of all sorts—became frustrated in the late sixties. And they began to look around and attack their system. The Tupamaros was the product of their frustrations: first reflecting their criticism then turning violent into a guerrilla band. It began as an attack on the system for not providing the jobs and the opportunities. And then it turned nasty.

And the system was very soft. It's a small country. The crime rate was low. And suddenly, this emerges. And the democratic government, which was soft and quite fragile couldn't handle it. So the military were called in.

The Uruguayan military had never fought a war; indeed, had never been called upon to do anything but parade and drill. And they came in and rolled up the Tupamaros, who were not very good as guerrillas. Once they trusted power, they decided that this was not a bad place to be, and took over the government.

And the interesting thing was that the repression did not occur then. I mean, the Tupamaros were guilty of crimes, there's no question. They blew up banks, they killed people, they committed terrorist acts—all of which were documentable—and criminal offenses. It was after the Tupamaros were rolled up, and the military assumed power that they began to investigate the root causes of the subversion. It was they that overreacted and committed all the abuses. They went into the universities, and became suspicious of university courses. They went after leftist professors. And before you know it, they were torturing people for information, making arbitrary arrests, and ultimately filling the prisons with some 5,000 political prisoners.

But when we found this out, and it took us about six months . . .

Q: Your embassy working . . .

PEZZULO: Yes. And we did it, you know, in a very studious way; in the meantime, just sort of keeping the ball afloat. Then I started to confront them with the reality of their own actions. And lo and behold, most of them didn't even know the history.

Q: Them being the Uruguayans?

PEZZULO: The Uruguayan military. And then I had the argument, you know, “Why are you paying so high a price for actions that can be reversed?” I don't understand it.

Q: You won the war, why . . .

PEZZULO: Well, that was sort of the centerpiece, and it became an intriguing problem. And they slowly began to see that this ambassador and this embassy were really interested in dealing with the problem. And they began to look at their own internal problems. And slowly prisoners who were in prison for years were released. And it slowly started to improve. I think it was an awareness that they in and of themselves couldn't

come to because they had built up this illusion that they were the great saviors of the society.

Q: A mythology of their own.

PEZZULO: Their own mythology. And Washington had another mythology. I mean, they were not pug-uglies, they were people who had gone through an experience which they were not prepared for, then tried to become cleansers of a society that didn't really need so thorough a cleansing; and got overzealous.

Q: Did you have a hard time selling this new look back in Washington?

PEZZULO: Well, the problem back in Washington became how to react to the positive steps the Uruguayan military was taking? And there were such things as helicopter parts that they needed badly. And at the time, there were some zealots on human rights that came in with the Carter administration—in the human rights office—that, you know, wanted blood. They were not willing to respond incrementally.

My approach to the Uruguayans was to prod them by saying: “You show me prisoner releases, you show me that you're closing up the offices that do the torturing”—there were two of them. “You close them down”—one of them they closed, by the way, by cutting off its gasoline allotment—just cut it off. “You do that, don't tell me about it, we'll find out, and we'll react.”

Once they began reacting positively, I needed some give from our side. When I approached Washington, the reaction from the ideologues was, “Now wait a minute. It's not finished, and you can't show me that you did thus and so.”

Q: From the human rights people, particularly?

PEZZULO: Yes.

Q: The military, on the other hand, in Washington were all for you, I suppose?

PEZZULO: Our military weren't involved.

Q: I see, they weren't?

PEZZULO: They were willing to do whatever had to be done. I mean, Uruguay was not an important country that they were going to fight for. And the whole program was a peanut; it didn't amount to very much. It's a small country; it's a country of two and a half, three million people.

But what was pleasing is that we were able to find out what the problem was. It was like trying to deal with a disease—giving medication—and you don't know what the heck you're dealing with. Pretty soon the medication was worse than the disease. But once it was cleared away, it was very pleasing to see that they suddenly realized that we were not trying to stick their nose in the mud; we were honestly trying to help and return the relationship to a more normal level.

And I wouldn't go so far as to say we were responsible for their return to democracy, but there are democrats down there who will say that. Out of this came a softening by the military, because they realized they had overplayed their hand; some of the more rational within the military started to see, and could argue their case a little better—this we were told when I was there—that they felt now they could speak, because the facts were coming out, and there had been unnecessarily harsh repression.

Q: Did you find in your own relationships with the military leaders there that you could establish a relationship of some trust, personally?

PEZZULO: I had—you know, some of them were very brittle. One of the commanders was a tough cookie, and he didn't like, at all, this gringo ambassador telling them about their business.

But some of the others were a lot more appreciative. Well, what really happened, I think, is that once they saw that this was a sincere effort to try to cope with the problem—I mean, I was not going to cocktail parties and forgetting this. We were getting into it. They realized there was a desire on the U.S. government part to do something constructive. And as they saw this was not an attempt to either embarrass them, or to make the case worse—in fact, it was an attempt to really find out what the heck happened—they became appreciative. So I had friends. You know, I had people who used to call me up and say, “Look, you met with so and so the other day, and you were a little tough on him. You know, he's this kind of guy, and it's best to handle him a little more gingerly.”

Q: These were Uruguay military?

PEZZULO: Uruguay military.

Q: So they saw you as, in a sense, pushing their cause, and they wanted you to do it right.

PEZZULO: That's right. And the politicians were unable to play any role. For example, the current President was proscribed from acting in an political way. In other words, he could not have a meeting in his house for any political purpose; it was against the law. And the two traditional parties, that went back to the beginning of the history of the country—the 1830s—were proscribed because of this foolishness about a bunch of kids who got out of sorts. I mean, it was almost a fairy tale, that had, you know, just gotten way out of control.

Q: So by the time you left, things had really improved a lot.

PEZZULO: They had gone from about 4,700 prisoners, down to less than 1,000. And they were letting them out quietly. And they were starting to talk about political liberalization. Now there was full censorship when I was there. All politicians were proscribed. Now this in a country that, prior to this period, had a free press and a prestigious university system. The military closed down the fine arts departments.

Q: It hits those countries worse. Chile was the other example.

PEZZULO: Same type of thing, yes.

Q: Did you leave there in order to be sent to Nicaragua?

PEZZULO: No, what happened was that Nicaragua was starting to get ugly, and I got a call one day, and they said, “We'd like you to go to Nicaragua.” Harry Barnes called me one morning, and said, “Can you give me your answer?”

And I said, you know, “Let me at least talk to my wife.”

Q: He was the Director General?

PEZZULO: He was the Director General. And I agreed. I left shortly thereafter. And went up to Washington, and off to Nicaragua.

Q: Let me ask you about that period in Washington, because you must have been immersed in the development of what became our policy toward Somoza, and his retirement, and what that all led to. What was the scene in Washington when you arrived?

PEZZULO: Well, the two main actors in the State Department were Pete Vaky, who was the Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs; and Bill Bowdler, who was the head of INR. Both former ambassadors, both very experienced, very competent officers. The reason they were the two principals was that about seven months before there was a negotiated—what they called a mediation effort—that was organized by the OAS (the Organization of American States). And Bowdler, who was in INR at the time, was assigned by the Secretary to represent the United States.

Now that effort was an attempt to get Somoza to step down. It didn't begin that way. What had happened was that in early 1978—you probably have heard this—one of Nicaragua's major editors . . .

Q: That was Chamorro?

PEZZULO: Pedro Joaquin Chamorro was shot down in the streets. Even though I don't think Somoza did it, the country went up in flames. And what had been a slow deterioration in his position over a long time, suddenly became untenable. Somoza over-reacted, brusquely using the National Guard to attack towns, firebombing and the like. It got so bad that by the middle of 1978, the OAS met to decide whether it could play a useful role.

After a particularly brutal attack by the National Guard in a town called Esteli, the OAS called a special session. They passed a resolution which led to the naming of a three-member commission: the United States, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic. And they were to go to Nicaragua to see if they could help in some way to bring about an end to the hostilities.

Well, they got in there—Bowdler headed our delegation—and they found that the Nicaraguans were completely polarized: Somoza with a few cronies, and the National Guard, on one side; and everything right, left, and center in opposition. And that recognition came to them very quickly, because the three delegations had spread out and had spoken to all sectors: newspaper editors, politicians, church leaders, campesinos, everyone. And it was, you know, just a repetition of the same message: “We've had enough, we've had enough.”

Well, that led to a period in which the OAS mediators were dealing with Somoza on the one hand, and on the other with this multi-partied opposition, to try to see if there was some way to resolve the conflict. The opposition organized itself, ultimately, into a national

front—a coordinated front—and demanded that Somoza leave, and that they would form a transitional government that would lead to general elections.

Well, negotiations went on and on for about three and a half months, ultimately were thwarted by Somoza, and collapsed. And when they collapsed, Pete Vaky and Bowdler, who had put a tremendous amount of effort into it, were exhausted. They had been fighting back and forth with the NSC and at the White House, because they thought more pressure should be put on Somoza by the United States. They thought if he'd leave the Presidency, there was a chance for a peaceful transition to some, yet undetermined, kind of democratic government.

Well, anyway, it failed. Pete, I think, was exhausted. Bowdler was exhausted. And we (the U.S.) sort of retracted from the scene, a bit. In historic terms it's very interesting, because the Sandinistas—who were divided into three divisions, three factions—once the mediation effort failed, came together into one faction, with the aid and assistance of Fidel Castro. In fact, they went to Cuba to sign a unity pact and formed the FSLN.

And then they began planning the armed overthrow of Somoza, with the assistance of Cuba, Venezuela, Costa Rica, and Panama. And I think it's fair to say we in the United States, and the State Department, and the intelligence services, were just not watching too carefully. I mean, everybody knew something was amiss, but you know, the antennae were not all that attuned.

Q: So we didn't realize that the Cubans had succeeded in pushing them into a . . .

PEZZULO: That was known, but that they were now building up for a major military campaign against Somoza, I don't think was known. In fact, when I was called back, and I went to a meeting in Costa Rica in which they were discussing Central American policy . . .

Q: When was that?

PEZZULO: The meeting was held in early May of 1979.

Q: You were still in Uruguay?

PEZZULO: Still in Uruguay. I went up to this meeting. It was a three-day meeting to look at Central America, because Central America was clearly in crisis. We reviewed the same kinds of problems we face now, only then they were a little more subdued. And the report on Nicaragua basically focused on how we would convince Somoza to step down at the end of his term in 1981. And not a whisper about impending civil war. In fact, the reports from all sectors indicated some buildup as well as fatigue. But nobody was talking about imminent attack.

Well, by the end of the month an imminent attack was real. And I get into Washington the first week in June, and the war was on; we had a civil war. I mean, they were starting to topple cities. And that same fatigue in Washington was evident. There's no question about it. You just sensed the fact that everybody was down.

Now another thing had occurred, which made it even more disappointing for us. And that is that our ambassador to Nicaragua, a political appointee—who I think, unfortunately, was ill-chosen for the job—had picked up and left Nicaragua in the spring. That's why they called me; because he just picked up and left, without authority, or so much as by your leave. So they had no ambassador, and a very inexperienced staff. There was no reporting or analysis coming out of Managua. They were in a bind. Here's a civil war going on; no ambassador, and an embassy which isn't operating.

And within the next three weeks we were meeting almost daily, either at the NSC, or in one meeting or another. And what we put together was basically a policy that said the only thing the United States can do now, given the circumstances, is go in and hasten the departure of Somoza—end the war. And if we can end the war, then there is a certain

amount of political capital we'll get for having stopped the bloodshed. And perhaps we can use that political capital to have some effect on the new government.

And the basic outlines of it—without getting complicated—were that we, as I say, we thought if we could end the conflict—and we probably were the only nation who could do that—we could get some political momentum to bring about a transition that was somewhat democratic, or participatory. I don't think anybody had high hopes, because in the middle of a civil war it's hard to figure out what's going to come after. And most of the discussions almost sounded like something about cleaning apartments, because everybody was talking about vacuums. I'll never forget this period. You know, what do we do about the vacuums, and this vacuum, and that vacuum.

And indeed, it becomes a fascination with people who are analyzing things to death, while events are changing quickly on the ground. And this followed me into Nicaragua. I mean, I was dealing with the war, and I kept getting the commentary from Washington, you know, by people who are sitting there dreaming up new schemes.

Q: Did they have the thought, perhaps, that if they got Somoza out early enough the Sandinistas wouldn't actually win the war, and that therefore there would be a possibility of a non-Sandinista government?

PEZZULO: Yes. Well, one of the crackpot ideas—it's crackpot in hindsight—was that we could suddenly construct a new transitional government of “wise men.” It borrowed from a concept considered eight months earlier during the mediation effort. Simply put, we would approach people who had already been identified as leaders in the community, and say, “Suppose we end the war, could you walk in and become president of Nicaragua?”

And one of my first jobs was to go in, in the middle of a civil war and find these people, who were all hiding—some of them had left the country—and propose to them that they form this group of wise men. Well, the problem is they didn't trust the U.S. government anymore. They had exposed themselves eight months before, when suddenly—when the

moment of truth came, to get Somoza out, we couldn't deliver. I mean, that's how they saw it—to put it in the bluntest terms. And they weren't about to expose themselves again in the middle of a civil war.

But in Washington's mind, especially the NSC, it was doable.

Q: Was this Brzezinski himself?

PEZZULO: It was Brzezinski and some of the people around him. I think people were groping for straws. They were hoping you could come up with some sort of a miracle, in the middle of a very distasteful situation. And what I was concerned with, as this thing started to deteriorate—because what was happening is that the war was coming in closer and closer into Managua—is that if we failed to remove Somoza, after all this chipping away, we'd end up with nothing. I mean, the only thing we had to deliver, and I kept saying this in various forums, was Somoza. And if we failed to get him out, and stop the bloodshed, then we had nothing.

The other idea, which I thought was more, at least, possible, was to preserve some elements of the National Guard; so that you would have a transition with some members of a security force that were disciplined, and capable of retaining some balance. Now again, in hindsight, that was illusory.

Q: When you arrived in Nicaragua, did you find that as possible?

PEZZULO: I thought it was possible. What made it impossible was Somoza, and that was hard to calculate. One thing I really miscalculated was how frightened he was. I think what happened at the end proves that he thought that the National Guard would kill him. Unfortunately, I couldn't get to the Guard directly, naturally; there was no way for me to do that, and my military attach# couldn't get to the guard, either, because they were fighting a war.

I was discussing the future of the Guard only with Somoza and his son. The planning was being done in a vacuum, to the extent that the officers in the Guard were not involved. I worked out a scenario with Somoza in which he would step down under his own constitutional processes; so there was no interruption in that—and turnover power to a member of the congress, who would then invite in the junta in San Jos#. They would begin deliberating on the transfer of power. The new head of the National Guard, who was going to be named, would do the same thing with the Sandinista forces. And there would be a cease-fire and stand-down, and the initiation of discussions about merging forces.

While we were talking about this with Somoza, Bowdler, who was in San Jos#, was talking to the junta. So everything we did—everything I negotiated—the junta was party to, even to the naming of the new National Guard commander.

The problem, we know in hindsight, was Somoza never relayed this, honestly, to his own Guard. Because he was afraid that if he did—if they ever thought he was leaving Nicaragua, and not getting what he ultimately promised them (that the United States was going to come in—once he got out—to support them)—they would kill him. And that's what frustrated this entire play. What happened was that Somoza left. We didn't come in to the support of the Guard, because we'd never promised that. But the Guard, deceived by Somoza, didn't know that. They suddenly found themselves without Somoza, and without U.S. assistance, and they broke down.

Q: They collapsed very quickly.

PEZZULO: They collapsed within—within twenty-four hours they were gone; they had all run up to Honduras, or to other places.

Q: You met with Somoza quite a few times. Had you met him before that time?

PEZZULO: I'd met him years before, during the earthquake of 1972.

Q: What were these meetings during the civil war like? Were they one on one?

PEZZULO: The first one was; I figured I owed it to him, just from a courtesy point of view, to make it one on one. So I went in alone. And that's when he had Congressman Murphy with him, and his foreign minister.

Q: Murphy was a congressman from New York, wasn't he?

PEZZULO: Staten Island. In fact, Somoza remarked surprisingly: “You're alone?”

I said, “Well, I thought that would be a courtesy to extend to you, if you wanted to speak to me alone.” After that I was accompanied by a team. Usually I brought somebody with me from Washington, and then later I had a DCM who was with me—a new DCM. So it was usually myself, a DCM—and another advisor; there'd be three on our side, and he'd have anywhere from three to six; it varied.

And they were very business-like meetings. I mean, he would—we knew he was taping, by the way. But he would go through these rhetorical diversions every once in a while, I guess it was time for him to make his little speech—and he'd go through a long speech about, you know, how much he liked the United States, and you know, he said, “I'm a Latin from Manhattan.” He spoke beautiful English and knew the United States better than I did. He'd been every place. And I think he honestly liked the United States of America—there's no question in my mind. He was a very charming rascal.

So he'd regale with stories of how he'd helped the United States here, there, and the other place. And he'd done our business for us. And how could we be doing this to him? And you know, the Communists were going to come in, and so on. And he went on, and on, and on. And he would belabor people in the Carter administration, who he really had a burn against—and Carter himself. So you had to listen to all of this, because this was all for the tape.

But then he'd get down to the business at hand, and talk about various things. My concerns were the timing of his departure; this National Guard issue—setting it up, getting the right commander. And part of the time, waiting for Washington to agree that we had to start the countdown. I was trying to push the countdown—you know, the 72-hour countdown.

Q: Because you saw things coming apart?

PEZZULO: Yes, and naturally being in the middle of it, and hearing it . . . I mean, you know, Managua at night was like being in a battlefield—firing, and so on. And then you just had the sense of this thing closing in on you. And we were getting constant reports on how much ammunition the guard had left. Somoza was making excursions—or trips out—for resupplies.

See, we had cut off supply to the Guard. We had stopped some supplies that were coming from Israel; on the high seas we stopped them—diverted the ships. We were telling his former suppliers in Central America—Guatemala and others—to cut it off. They did. So his materiel was slowly running down. We knew that. We also knew the opposition forces were building up. So you could just sense a closing in. There was no way of knowing when it would break, so you tended to want to get the darn scenario in place.

Plus, as I say, there was—I think there was a lot of lyricism on the part of Washington, as to what you could do under the circumstances. And maybe it's natural, when you're sitting up at Washington, you figure you have more options than you really have. I didn't see the options, and I kept saying, “I don't see these options—not now.” I mean, these things are not going to be realizable, except for the National Guard, which we went down the line with. And then it folded in on us.

So it was a very interesting—I mean, I've never seen so many flash, top-secret cables. I never saw that many in my life. We would have these drills, as you know, overseas. But I

was sending three or four flash cables a day, and getting six or seven in return. It was just incredible. It was an embassy under siege; we had no women there and no families. We had a small security detachment from Panama, for emergency.

Q: A marine detachment?

PEZZULO: Well, for an emergency evacuation, because we were sitting in a compound.

Q: Was there fighting in the city of Managua?

PEZZULO: Yes, when I arrived there I couldn't land in the city—I couldn't land at the airport because the airport was cut off from the city. The Sandinistas were in-between. So I flew in, in a small airplane, that dropped me off at a landing strip on the coast and took off.

Q: And there you were!

PEZZULO: Yes. And they picked me up in a car, and drove me up to the capital. That lasted for two days. Then the siege ended because the Sandinistas had really put themselves in a very exposed position, and they retreated one evening to the city of Masaya. But there was constant firing—shooting. The major battles were out, away from the city; although there was a constant closing in on the city. You felt as if you were in this little enclave, which was not going to hold too long; and that if you were going to strike a deal, and get this thing done, you had better get on with it.

And what struck me then was how—and I think it's true, and I'm sure from your own career you'll see the similarities—the field tends to have a different view of the world from Washington. And it's just a natural reality. You're sitting one place, and they're sitting in another.

Q: It takes about two days for the transition to occur, when you got from the headquarters out to the field.

PEZZULO: And of course, under these circumstances it was even more dramatic—the differences.

Q: Your sense that things were moving very fast and you didn't have a lot of options, whereas in Washington, there was a sense that we still had things we could accomplish, and time to do it.

PEZZULO: And time to do it. And that you could sit down and go through this in a very orderly manner. It just wasn't there. But it was an exciting—it was just a very fascinating period.

Q: Were you in touch with others besides Somoza? Or did you have to deal primarily with him?

PEZZULO: No, I talked to a lot of people. I met most of these wise men, who were squirreled away around the city, and we'd go out and find them. I spoke to the Archbishop as much as I could. In fact, the two of us were caught in the middle of a firefight. I was talking to him and they started a fire-fight around us, and we had to break off our discussion.

Q: What was his name?

PEZZULO: Obando y Bravo.

Q: The present one?

PEZZULO: Yes, he was then an archbishop. He became a cardinal, I guess, about four years ago. I had known him before, and he was one of the first people I called on.

Q: Obando y Bravo?

PEZZULO: Yes. A very nice gentleman. He's gotten harder as time has gone on, because life has become difficult for him. But he's a sage old gentleman, who watches, and listens, and was very, very critical of Somoza for a long time. So I conferred with him just to get a sense of what he saw happening. And I told him what we were doing; I wanted him to know. I said, “This is what I'm doing, and I want you to understand if there's any question in your mind. This is the route we're on.”

He said, “Well, that's a fine route. Try to get this war ended. This country is bleeding to death. And anything I can do I'll be glad to do.”

Q: He would have liked to see Somoza leave, I suppose?

PEZZULO: Absolutely. Oh, he was working hard eight months before, during the mediation effort. He was trying to do everything possible to get the mediation to succeed. He saw it for what it was: the last really peaceful chance to end that conflict.

And I met with other politicians. I met with the few diplomats that remained; there weren't many left, because it was a war zone. But we'd meet for lunch, or we'd meet one another in the office. But it was not the kind of place you could go out and wander around in.

Q: And the National Guard you didn't meet with, because they were out fighting the war.

PEZZULO: They were out fighting. And then they had curfew from five o'clock in the evening, until—I think it was eight o'clock the next morning. So you were buttoned up in the evening. It was very restricted.

Q: And you had no contact, I assume, with the insurgent forces?

PEZZULO: Oh no. Well, one of the things interesting is that in this—remember I told you about this meeting we had in San Jos#, in May. I asked then what we were doing with this leftist group—the Sandinistas then had a name; because before then they weren't called

the Sandinistas, it was just sort of a melange of different leftist groups. I was told that we had no contacts. We had never talked to them, which just shocked the pants off of me. I said, “I can't believe this. You tell me we're not talking to these people?”

Q: At a time when you physically could have, before the war actually began.

PEZZULO: Oh sure, sure. Well, it turned out that a lot of the people that we had been dealing with before were closet Sandinistas, but we didn't know that.

Q: It just sounds as though we didn't really have a very thorough understanding of what was going on.

PEZZULO: We didn't have our ear to the ground. That embassy, I think, was a failure. I don't know why, but we never considered Nicaragua a very important country.

Q: But they must have had a station there, and CIA people?

PEZZULO: The station was not too active in Nicaragua, interestingly because they didn't trust Somoza. And we had an ambassador—back during the early seventies, up through the time when Nixon left office, and then he was removed—who used to pass things to Somoza all the time. So the station was very concerned about too much information going through.

Somoza—you have to keep in mind was really wired into our system in a way that's hard to understand. Well, you can see that from Congressman Murphy. But he had very good intelligence on what we were doing at the highest levels. And, you know, for that reason a lot of people were very intimidated by Somoza. Because he could pull levers. In fact, one day he—I think it was about the third or fourth conversation we had—he called Washington, and tried to open a dialogue there. And he was told, “You've got our man, you talk to PEZZULO.”

Washington called me and said, “We just wanted you to know that.”

And the next time I walked in he said, “Hey, you've got a lot of power, don't you?” He said, “They told me from Washington I've got to deal with you.”

Q: But he was used to being able to . . .

PEZZULO: Sure, always did.

Q: . . . to go over the head of the embassy.

PEZZULO: Yes, sure. He did that all the time, I think. He always had somebody in Washington he could appeal to, and then he could play with our ambassador.

Q: Were these people in the executive branch of the government? Were they congressmen?

PEZZULO: Well, certainly Murphy—Murphy I knew. But no, he had people in . . . I'll tell you a very interesting story, that shows you how good this guy was. The day before I left, when it was finally decided I should go in . . .

Q: The day you left Washington?

PEZZULO: Before I left Washington, yes. We were in the White House situation room, and the military man there—I think it was—I can't think of his name now, but he was the head of the Joint Chiefs at the time. He said, “Larry, why don't you take in a military officer with you because, you know, Somoza was a West Pointer, and maybe we can get you somebody who knew him.”

And I said okay. He called my office when I got back, and he said, “There's going to be a Colonel so-and-so coming to see you.” I said fine.

In walked this colonel within two hours, and he said, “I understand I'm going to go into Nicaragua.”

And we started to talk, and I said, “You know what we're going to do?”

And he said, “I understand.”

I said, “I'm going in there to get him out. If you have any problems with that, I mean, if that causes you any grief let me know, because I don't want you to have any questions.”

He said, “No, no. I'm a career man, and I'll do whatever you tell me. I'll follow you right down.”

I said, “Fine.” So he went off to get his affairs in order, and we were supposed to meet again the next day, and prepare to leave.

And the next morning I'm walking down to Christopher's office, with Pete Vaky walking along, and he said, “Larry, why did you agree to take in a military man?”

I said, “Pete, I wasn't thinking and you know, I thought it was okay.”

He said, “Do you really want anybody?”

I said, “I feel more comfortable alone, to tell you the truth. I don't know this guy.”

He said, “Well, let's tell Christopher.”

So we walked into Christopher's office, and Pete said, “Look, Chris, you know Larry doesn't really want this colonel with him. He met him yesterday, and he'd be better off alone.” He said, “I can give him somebody.” And he did. He gave me one of his people who was very good and helped me a lot.

Q: Pete Vaky gave you one of his people?

PEZZULO: Yes, an officer in the Latin America Bureau named Barnaby.

So we called off the colonel; Christopher called right then. It was General Rogers—Air Force General.

Q: Was the Chief of Staff?

PEZZULO: Chief of Staff. So I go in and see Somoza. And remember, I told you the first time I went in, he commented, “You're alone?”

Q: Yes.

PEZZULO: It didn't strike me then. Four days later—about the fourth meeting later, he said to me, “Where's Colonel . . .”

I said, “I never heard of such a colonel.”

That's how good he is.

Q: Yes. He had a lot better intelligence than we had.

PEZZULO: Yes, very good. And I think one of the unfortunate things in all of this is that there were times when people talk about possibilities, and options—you know how this is, you start talking and throwing out ideas. There were some people who said a few things about the possibility of a U.S. input of troops under certain circumstances. And I remember Vance, at the time, got furious. He said, “I don't want to hear that. That's something the United States is not going to do. That situation does not warrant it.”

I think—I think that sort of wove through the bureaucracy somewhere. I think somebody, somewhere said, “Look, as a contingency, can somebody just do . . .” You know how

these things are—"Can you do sort of a contingency plan, if in case . . ." That's enough. That, I think, would have been known, and I think a guy like Anastasio Somoza would have found out about it. Because it made sense. I think he thought that at the eleventh hour—he kept saying it in different ways: "Are you people really prepared to do this?" I think he thought when it came to the crunch, we couldn't face the possibility of losing him, and his regime, and we would bring in troops.

Q: So your job, really, was to convince him that that wasn't so.

PEZZULO: I never thought, you know, that he held that as deeply. I thought it was something he was trying to get us to consider. But I think it was a stronger—I'm saying, if—and it's a strong possibility—this was made in a casual way, and somebody said, "Well, let's make a contingency plan," and it was done in the Pentagon—given his ties into our military, which were historic . . .

You see, he was a West Point graduate. He was very close to a lot of military officers, and cultivated them. It is altogether possible that somebody was available to tell him that kind of thing. "Look, Tacho, I just want you to know that these plans are in place." And that would have been enough to convince him that if push came to shove, the United States was going to take some military action, which would have given him a certain comfort, that he had friends up there who would take care of him.

See, he'd lived through scrapes before. Don't forget, this man had grown up as the son of a dictator. There were ups and downs. There were administrations that were more, you know, critical than others. But they'd always gotten through them. And he was right in saying he'd always been a friend. During the Bay of Pigs, where did we launch aircraft from? From Nicaragua. Where did we train? Nicaragua. He'd been a friend in need; he'd carried our water. You couldn't deny that. He felt that he was America's friend, and to some extent he was perfectly right. So why not, in this hour of need, have some

people push these crazy guys in the administration—who didn't understand his value—to ultimately come to his rescue.

Q: What finally convinced him that nobody was coming to his rescue, and that he ought to step down and leave?

PEZZULO: I don't know. I think he may have carried it right to the end, and then he finally left. And I'm not even saying that I could prove—because we'll never prove—he died, he was killed several years later—that that was even in his mind. But given the type of person he was, who had lived this charmed life and had had a good relationship with the United States, there's no reason to think he didn't feel that we could not live without him.

Q: But I suppose it was the deterioration of the local military situation, finally, that convinced him there was no option.

PEZZULO: There was no option. I mean, he had no supplies. What happened in the conflict was that you didn't have a war, you had a popular insurrection, which is much worse than a war. The Sandinistas did not win a military victory. What happened was cities and towns just rose up and went after the Guard. Little kids, mothers, and daughters, and so on. And pretty soon the Guard was caught in their barracks; they couldn't move, and then they'd starve them out, and fire bomb them, and so on.

Where the Guard met the Sandinistas as a military force, they beat them. They did it in the southern zone, where there was really a set-piece battle. And there was no movement on that front, ever. You know, they established a front—the Sandinistas couldn't move. That's where Eden Pastora was the commander.

So he was facing the most impossible of circumstances. The populace had really risen up against him, and were aiding and abetting these young people. So there were a lot of illusions here. I mean, the illusion indulged in by the Sandinistas is that they won a military victory, which was not true. The Nicaraguan people rose up against their leader

and threw him out, and they happened to be—they, the Sandinistas—the armed vanguard of that. But they never overthrew Somoza. They alone would never have done it. It was the Nicaraguan people who overthrew Somoza. And that's what—no guard—no national force can ever combat—you just can't combat your whole country: the little kids, the wives—impossible.

Q: You were called back before Somoza actually left, to participate in a meeting in the White House?

PEZZULO: I was back twice.

Q: Twice?

PEZZULO: I was back twice.

Q: July 1 and 2.

PEZZULO: Yes, the first time was because one of these ideas about forming this wise men's group had reached the point where people thought that it should be considered again. And I went back to tell them it's no go—this thing is not going to fly, and to forget it. So that was one crucial point.

Then there was another meeting, shortly thereafter that—I'm not sure of the date—which had to do with the expansion of the junta. The junta was announced in San Jos#—a five-member junta. And the concept began to develop within Washington circles, that we should expand it to include more moderates. And I was called up to take part in those discussions.

I found it, again, to be sort of a nothing discussion. I mean, what's the difference if you have five or seven? Anyway, this is the kind of thing that Washington was putting a lot of attention into. So they talked and talked and talked.

Q: This was Carter, and Vance, and Brzezinski?

PEZZULO: Vance and Carter were really outside of this. It really came out of the NSC.

Q: I see.

PEZZULO: It was Brzezinski and his staff that really were very hot to trot.

The second visit was for the purpose of discussing the enlarging of the junta, from the five that they had begun with—to a larger number, to include more moderates. And again, I felt that this was, sort of, a marginal issue of no great consequence, because the key was going to be that the people with the guns were going to have the power, and whether you now had five people in the junta, or seven people, or all moderates, or all leftists—you know, I didn't see that this was a major issue. But again, there was a sense of a great deal of urgency about this.

When I went up on it, there was a long discussion, and Carter then addressed it to Torrijos, who had come in to meet on this particular issue.

Q: Who was that?

PEZZULO: Torrijos, the President—well, the dictator from Panama, who had been in and out of this issue all along; conferring with us, and doing some of the negotiating, and some of the helpful work, at the same time that he was supporting the Sandinistas in military assistance.

And what happened out of the whole thing is that we did recommend that some—I know I, myself, Pete Vaky, were not all that hot on it, but it was recommended to Carter. He recommended it to Torrijos. Torrijos raised it with the Sandinistas, and they turned it down. And then when they turned it down, he told them it was an American plan. So the whole thing was a bust.

Q: End of . . .

PEZZULO: End of episode, yes. In the meantime we had put together, basically, the scenario for Somoza leaving. And the scenario was, fundamentally, that he would turnover power, constitutionally, to a senator. He selected a fellow named Urcuyo, who was an unknown sort of hanger-on, with no great consequence.

But Urcuyo, then, was to go through the process that we had laid out; he was to invite the junta from San Jos# to come to Managua. The junta was going to come in, accompanied by the archbishop of Managua, as well as members of the international community. Which were going to include Ambassador Bowdler, the foreign ministers of Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, and Costa Rica, and whomever else.

The idea was to have a goodly number of people present from the international community, to give it a—make it a moment in history. At that point there would be a press conference right at the airport, and they would discuss the process of transition, which would take place over the next several days; where Urcuyo would hand over power to this transitional government—the junta in San Jos#.

And then they would follow through on the promises they had made to the OAS, that they would begin—they would take power, and then call for early elections, and so on, which they of course failed to do. In the meantime, the military commanders would meet, and talk about stand-down, merging the forces, and so on.

Well, this was explained to Somoza in a very detailed way. By this point in time, the commander had—the new Guard commander had been selected by us, with Somoza's concurrence, and the concurrence of the Sandinistas, through the junta in San Jos#. The new Guard commander was a lieutenant colonel, unknown to anybody—a fellow named Mejia. All the Guard officers who were tainted by Somoza, which included most all the

lieutenant colonels, and colonels, were all retired in one official act, and Mejia was made commander of the National Guard. So that was taken care of.

So Urcuyo was to take charge of the country; have it turned over to him. He was then to invite the junta from San Jos#, and a whole series of things were to happen. Somoza left at three o'clock in the morning—the morning of the 17th.

Q: Did you see him off?

PEZZULO: No. Before that he had had the ceremony in which he had passed the baton to Urcuyo. Urcuyo, then, was supposed to do a series of things. By about six-thirty in the morning—or six o'clock in the morning, we saw the thing unraveling. I got to him. And he had been through two meetings, where we went through every one of these issues. He claimed to be ignorant of all these things, and said, “I don't understand this. I'm the President of Nicaragua.”

I said, “Well, that's understood . . .” Well, anyway, it was then that I made that—told Washington that Somoza had backed away from the agreement, and this triggered the call from Christopher to Somoza in Miami. Somoza then quickly chartered two yachts, and got out of the United States. But he had clearly given Urcuyo the other message, that you know, he was to stay on; not let the Communists come in, and goodness knows what.

My theory is that Somoza was afraid that if he ever went to the Guard and said he was leaving, and they were going to turnover power to the Sandinistas, they would have killed him. And he lied to Urcuyo. Now, Urcuyo was just a plain liar, because he sat in on two meetings when I explained the scenario step by step to him, and then I had my DCM—Tom O'Donnell—go over to his hotel, and go through it with him again, minutely. And he was just a plain, bald-faced liar. Mejia was duped. I went to tell him that very day. Then I went up to see the President with him, and we had a pretty stormy session. This was the second meeting.

Q: You and Mejia went to see Urcuyo—the President?

PEZZULO: Yes, and he denied all of this, and said he was insulted, that I was telling him what to do, and all this kind of nonsense. By this time I think Mejia was starting to smell a rat, plus the National Guard was starting to collapse. I told Urcuyo. I said, “My friend, you're going to be a president without a country. What are you talking about? This thing will not hold. It will only hold under the scenario we set up. That's all agreed—with the Sandinistas, with everybody. You can't do this.”

So it began to collapse. A day later he ran out of the country. Then because it was collapsing, I made the recommendation to Washington that I had to be pulled out right away, with some part of the embassy, accompanied by a public statement, criticizing Somoza for having broken the pact. Because if we didn't do that, it would look as if this was our plan all along. They agreed, and I left on the morning of the 18th.

Q: That's the next morning.

PEZZULO: That's right, the next morning—afternoon actually—well, it was about eleven o'clock. Tom, then, was there to just hold this little group together. He met with Mejia—by this time Urcuyo had fled the country—Mejia said, you know, “Can I meet with Humberto Ortega, to see if we can work this out?”

Q: Ortega was considered, even then, to be the head of . . .

PEZZULO: The head of the forces.

Q: The head of the junta military.

PEZZULO: The military arm. But it was too late, and Mejia had nothing to deal with; he had no armed forces left. His air force had run away, his infantry had run out to Honduras, and the poor devil was stuck. So he eventually got on a plane and flew to Guatemala. It was

over. I mean, there was no—the National Guard had disappeared. And then you had the Sandinistas just drive into the country, and drive up to the capital on the 17th, and take over.

Q: What were you doing at that time?

PEZZULO: I went to Panama. I took part of the embassy to Panama.

Q: As a demonstration of . . .

PEZZULO: That we had been betrayed by Somoza. We put out a public announcement stating that the plan that we had put together with Somoza, and had coordinated with the Sandinistas, had been aborted by Somoza. That was clear.

Then they asked me to come to Washington. And when I got to Washington, I asked Pete to request agreement from the new government in Managua. Because I never submitted my credentials to Somoza; I went down there without anything. That was Bill Bowdler's idea. He said, “You shouldn't be dealing with him as ambassador; you should be dealing with him as a special . . .

Q: Envoy from Washington.

PEZZULO: Special envoy. So I went without the courtesy of any presentation of credentials, even though I had bought a white suit. You used to want to present—I still have the damn white suit. (Laughs)

So I demanded that we get approval from the new government, because I didn't know what their attitude would be, and I felt—you know—since we're going to start anew, we'd better get this clear right from the outset. And they accepted right away. And I went down.

In fact, I flew down on a C-141, out of Andrews, that was filled with food. Because there was a food deficit, and we began flying food in right toward the end, and kept flying in.

So it was sort of a dramatic act to go back in with a plane-load of food. So I flew in with a C-141. Landed. Met at the airport by Tomas Borge, of all people.

We had a conversation at the airport. And I presented my credentials, I think, two days later. They had a date for me right away. And I told the junta—they were all there, except one—that we looked to a period where we could develop a relationship. The United States understood the trauma the country had gone through. We thought we had played a role in trying to prevent any further bloodshed. We took it upon ourselves to feel a certain amount of pride in that. But we want to help, in a meaningful way, the new administration. And we were prepared to look at aid packages, and so on and so on.

And shortly thereafter, we gave them some money. Their treasury was bare; we gave them some hard cash right away. And we started opening up some programs that had been frozen during the Somoza period. And slowly began . . . Well, the food was coming in all the time, by the way. And then we began working on the longer-term programs.

You're right, in the sense that what was portrayed in the press was exactly what people were saying. “What are these? Aren't they Communists? How do we deal with them?” In fact, when I came back to Washington shortly after the fall of Somoza, they put me downstairs with the spokesman. The first question was, “Are these people Communists?” And the position we were taking at the time was, “Look, we don't want to prejudge something like this. Let their actions speak for what they are. These people have gone through a terribly painful period. The Nicaraguan people have suffered. And we're going to take them at their word, that they're going to put a democratic administration into being. But during this period of need we're going to be as helpful as we can. And we're not going to be driven to make judgments about it.”

And we held to that. Pete [Vaky] and I were up in the Congress, shortly thereafter, giving testimony. And this is basically the line Pete took, and I took.

Now, confidentially, when we talked to people, and what I was reporting back was: first of all there was no question there was deep-seeded animosity toward the United States in this group. I started getting around to see all the commanders—nine commanders—and the foreign minister, who was a former Maryknoll—well, he was a Maryknoll at the time. Escoto, who bore a tremendous amount of resentment against the United States, even though he was born in the United States, and speaks English as well as anybody. Viscerally anti-American, in almost an emotional way. Interestingly, because his father was a Somoza diplomat, and a slavish Somoza diplomat.

You felt it all through this, this rebellious quality. A young man resenting the failings of his parents. And what I tried to do was to show that, you know, a mature power—a major power can understand change, can understand young people wanting to transform a country. That we thought we were not the ones to judge that. But there were certain things that had to be understood, in terms of a relationship.

So I kept the tough issues to a very bilateral kind of thing. And in public we were supportive, and we were trying our best to give whatever assistance was needed. They responded, I thought, quite well, given what they thought we were; you know, suddenly finding themselves in a governing role. They were—and Nicaraguans in general—are very gracious people; they happen to be that kind of people. So you can meet with them, and the conversations will always be at least civilized. Even though they got heated, they were civilized. And they really respected the fact that we had done some of the things we did; they respected that. But they resented, very much, the long-term support of Somoza, and so on. So you'd have to go through that.

And the questions that arose early were, you know, what are these bunch of guys? I mean, are they going to work themselves into a lather? Are they going to ever turnover power to anybody? And what's the role going to be of the Cubans, and so on.

Well, it wasn't too long before it became clear that the Cubans had an in that nobody was going to compete with. The Cubans had fought with them; the Cubans were their military advisors. The Cubans are very good at ingratiating themselves because they know the culture. And Castro was bigger than life to them. To them there were very few heroes that they could think of that would supersede Castro. So that quality was there. And I think all of them, sort of, aspired to be pint-sized Castros.

So you saw that at the same time you were hoping that there was a learning curve here, and that these people would understand that governing is not just a question of, you know, making speeches, and acting like a popinjay. But the chances of this thing ever moving democratic were very slim. And that I reported early, even though I thought we should constantly push on it, constantly remind them what they promised, constantly talk about the human rights, and free press, and so on. And we made a big fetish of that. I mean, I never had anybody come into that country that we didn't go past La Prensa and visit. And they knew exactly what that meant.

And we made a big to-do about human rights. I went to their independent human rights commission, which was investigating every abuse, and so on. I went out to their jails early, to look at them. You know, I just made a big, major effort to have them understand that we didn't have our eyes closed. And when we spoke, I used to speak quite honestly about it. That they made a hell of a mistake by having so many people in jail. That they'd taken on a burden that was going to leech them for no good reason. And over the long term, it was going to cost them more than they'd ever be able to recover from—whatever security concerns it addressed.

I lectured them about security. I said, you know, “I've been around enough security people to tell you they give you bad advice almost all the time.” And I said, “Watch the intelligence people that you're getting from Cuba. Because you think they're wiring for you; I'm telling you, they're wiring you for sound.” And you get some interesting responses back.

I found two things that we had to worry about. One was their export of revolution. Because they were fascinated by the romantic idea that they were the new revolutionaries. Castro told them, “You're the new generation.” This guy is a—you know, he's a world-class snake oil salesman. He really is a mesmerizer.

Q: You met him, didn't you?

PEZZULO: Yes, he's a mesmerizer.

Q: The first anniversary . . .

PEZZULO: He's a real, real article; but he's a snake oil salesman. No matter how good he is, he's a snake oil salesman. He convinced these guys that they had brought about a new concept of revolution. His (Cuba) was almost an antiquated model; this (Nicaragua) was the new model, see, and the new model had two new elements in it. One was religion; it had the church. And the second—it had people from the private sector. In other words, it was a total societal overthrow. And it had all the elements of a new revolution. But this was baloney. They were just taken in by this. And they were taken by the idea that they could play a role way beyond Nicaragua.

In fact, I remember one of them was telling me—I think it was Humberto Ortega. He said, “You know, you are very fortunate to be here at this time. Because you can see from us, you know, how things are going to play out all through Latin America.” He said, “We're going to be the model all through Latin America.” Well, you know, when you get a young guy—32 years old, who has just become all blown up with euphoria, who attained power because of the fortunes of the draw—I mean, the Sandinistas didn't win a victory, they just slid in on a series of circumstances, that just were fortuitous for them. Nonetheless, it gave them this heady feeling that the whole gosh-dang continent was going in their direction, Chile, and all the rest of Latin America. They felt, “We are the center of the universe.”

Now what was happening, which made this thing very credible to them—every cuckoo nut around the world was there. We had extremists from Peru. We had the Montoneros from Argentina. Miristas from Chile. The Tupamaros from Uruguay. We had the PLO. We had North Koreans; it was the first time I saw the North Koreans. We had revolutionaries from Africa. I mean, you walked around—especially at the Intercontinental Hotel—and it looked like some sort of a Hollywood stage.

Then you had all the people who were looking for happenings. You know, Hollywood starlets, and musicians, and goodness knows who else. They were all there. And these guys were booted up to stardom. They were heady as hell. They really believed they were supermen. It was very dangerous; it seemed to me it was very dangerous for these people to think that they could do these things, when they couldn't even run the country. Nicaragua was in terrible shape.

And I used to talk to them about relations with their neighbors, and relations with us. Basically the line I took was that they should attend to their own needs at home. That became problematic. I mean, it was there right in the beginning. And they would argue at great length that, you know, you don't understand that there's sort of a harmonic feeling here, throughout this region. And all these other societies are not going to make it; they're going to topple. And I'd say, “You're going to pay a price. We are not going to sit idly by. Forget it.” You know, “If you want this regime to survive, you better tend to your own business. As long as you tend to your own business, at least people can be tolerant of some of the screeching. But if you start fooling around . . .”

“Oh, well, we're not doing quite that.” Well, this became central, and I think it's always been the central issue; just how much they were going to intrigue and get themselves involved in other countries. And ultimately, I think it led them into problems that have beset them ever since.

Now, they come to power in July of 1979. In March, 1980 the presidential campaigns began in the United States. The Republican platform contained a plank identifying the Nicaraguan Sandinistas as Marxist Leninists, and so on and so on—that we would not tolerate them, and so on. So you had that in the mix right away.

Then, of course, Reagan wins in the election, and that starts to turn events even further than they would have gone, I think.

Q: What kind of a position did that put you in personally, with your contacts there? This seemed to show a face of an America that you hadn't been representing to them.

PEZZULO: At first nobody understood what it would mean. I didn't have any idea, either. The only people that ever came down there were some real creeps, that had been tied up with groups out of Arizona.

Q: Right wing?

PEZZULO: Right wing, yes. This was the Santa Fe group, and they had people who went out, did some writing. A couple of, sort of, agency people, who had been in the agency; and a couple of other people wandering around. People from Helms's staff came down. But you didn't have any sense of where it was going.

Then, of course, things appeared in the press in early December, that there was a hit-list of ambassadors, who were going to be replaced. And one was Bob White, and I was on the hit-list, and so on.

You know, I could feel there was some wave sweeping through Washington, that was going to make this damn thing impossible. I did get hold of Haig. I went up to Washington in December, and met with Secretary Muskie. I just happened to walk by his office, and I wanted to say goodbye. And he invited me in and wanted to talk. And we talked at length.

And I told him about this business. And he said, “Oh, you've got to talk to Haig.” He said, “Let me call him. I find him to be a reasonable man.”

Eventually, I got to Haig, and spoke to him. And I told him I would retire, resign. I mean, I was not going to be party to this, if they wanted to do that. He said, “No, no, no. I don't want you to do that.” He said, “I know about your work, and I want you to stay there, and I want you to give me your best advice.”

And I said, “Well, fine, I'll stay there.” I didn't want to stay there long, because I had gotten a commitment—even from the Carter administration—that I'd leave in August—the summer of 1981. I mean, it was an exhausting job. You were really a grind, you know, putting up with the propaganda, and then trying to get these people to behave rationally. Then fighting in Congress for money, and having them traipse out all the stupid statements these people were making all the time. You were fighting on all sides all the time. So I figured two and a half years was enough. And I had asked to be relieved in the summertime, and they said fine.

So when I saw Haig, I said, “That was the commitment, I'll stay through the summer.” And he was fairly decent. And I went up in February, again, when they were in office. And already the State Department had transformed itself. They were already changing positions. I went up, and they had cut off all the assistance. And I went to Haig, and I said, “Look, what the heck are we doing? You know, let's do this . . . You know, if we want to sanction this bunch, then you don't need me. I mean, I think we can still work these guys. That's what I like to do, sort of angle them a little bit. I'm not saying they're going to turn Nicaragua into Connecticut, but I think we can deal with these fellows. And I think we can prevent them from doing stupid things, and causing problems in the hemisphere. I think that's a cheaper way to go about it, than to get into some sort of John Wayne approach. You're going to lose going down that track.”

He said, “I buy that.”

Q: He did? That's interesting.

PEZZULO: He did, in February. What I didn't know, was that he was, at the same time, agreeing to begin this covert program. I suspected it, because I'd heard some funny things were going on. The complete openness I enjoyed before was changing.

Q: In Washington?

PEZZULO: In Washington. I mean, Vance was great. Muskie was great. People around him were very forthcoming. Even the NSC, that was a little problematic at first, understood that this was an antsy situation. They really gave me my head. They said, you know, “Follow wherever you think you can go with it.” Nobody knew where the hell to go with it. (Laughs) You sort of had to move it along.

Well, then suddenly I could see this was not going to continue. I mean, the week after I went to see Haig, and he tells me, “Look, I'll follow you. Just keep me informed,” I went to see a member of the junta one day, on something, and he said, “Why do we have to get insulted by you people?”

And I said, “What do you mean, insulted? What happened?”

He said, “Well, there was a diplomatic reception in the State Department. And our representative was there, and your Secretary of State went up to her and put his finger in her face, and said . . .

Q: This is a Nicaraguan saying this to you?

PEZZULO: Yes. This was one of the members of the governing junta. I think it was Sergio Ramirez. He stuck his finger in her face, and said, “You better tell the boys down south, you know, your government, that they better behave themselves, otherwise they're really going to be in for it.” Allegedly, Haig had made the threat in front of other diplomats.

I said, “I can't believe this.” Then I checked it out; later it turned out that he did insult the Nicaraguan Ambassador. And, you know, what the hell?

Ramirez said, “You know, we've had a tough enough time just working this thing through.” I called up, and I asked—I don't know who was there, I think Enders at that time, or somebody—and it was true.

I said, “What the hell was that for? What do we accomplish by sophomoric insults?”

He said, “Well, you know, the Secretary . . .” But Haig was like that. You never knew what he was going to say.

Q: This was Haig himself who . . .

PEZZULO: This was Haig. And he'd go off and have a press conference, and blow off some steam. So it was clear to me you just couldn't hold this baby. I mean, this was going to be some sort of a showboat up in Washington, playing for some other game, and you were just some sort of a popinjay. I started pressing hard to get out of there. I called Enders, and . . . But they didn't want to respond. I mean, Enders was busy with other matters.

Q: He was Assistant Secretary then?

PEZZULO: Well, he was delayed in being confirmed for a long time because he had problems with—I think he had problems with Helms. But he was held up. But he was sitting there. But he was not official. And he had Steve Bosworth, who is just a first class guy. And Steve became, basically, the guy I worked with. I didn't know Steve, but Steve was a pro. And I used to tell Steve, you know, “You tell Tom that I'm leaving here.” Nobody was talking about orders. I figured this is crazy; I'm just going to be left here, and they'll work around me, and I might just as well be in Ohio, for all the good I'm going to do.

And then, the relationship really started to go sour. Because the Sandinistas realized that I wasn't playing a major role anymore. They could see—the Sandinistas—that before, at least, I was representing an administration; the administration was in line with what I was saying. Now, I was just somebody who was representing the United States of America, but I was not representing the administration. So the whole things became less real, and it wasn't any fun anymore. So I wanted to get out, and I pressed hard.

And finally, I called to Washington, and made the arrangements to go to the University of Georgia. I mean, nobody was doing it for me. I called. I said, “Do you have one of those Diplomats in Residence slots? I want to go off for a year.”

They looked around, and said, “Yes, we can get you to Georgia. How's that sound?”

I said, “Fine, cut the orders. Tell Tom.” And I called and said, “Look, they have offered me this. I think it's good. And I'm going to be leaving on this date.” And I encouraged Tom to come down—well, I encouraged somebody to come down, and he decided to come. And he was good. And he saw that you could deal with the Sandinistas.So I kept pushing for someone to come down. I felt someone—they were not naming an ambassador. I mean, I was going to leave, and there was no movement to name anybody. And I felt at least someone from Washington should come down, and get a sense of this. So I urged Bosworth. I said, “You come down, Steve.”

And finally, he called me one day, and he said, “Tom is coming.”

And I said, “Great.” And he came down, and you know, Tom can speak for himself on this . . .

Q: That's Tom Enders?

PEZZULO: Tom Enders. You know, he's a tough cob, but he's an intelligent man. And he came down, and I'm convinced he thought it would be something different. And he found

that you could hit these guys right between the eyes with a bat, and they'd come right back and talk to you. I mean, they're not the kind that get up and walk out of the room, which I like. And he laid it out for them. And, in effect, said, “You know, we're coming to a crossroads with you guys. And if we don't reach an accommodation, it's going to be a problem for you. Because we're a big country, and I'm just telling you. I don't want to threaten you, but the fact of the matter is, we can hurt you.”

And they went back, and you know, all the recriminations about you people are doing this, and that, and the other thing; you don't understand, and you accuse us of this, and that, and the other thing. And all these statements you made in Washington—your President, your Secretary of State. So it went back and forth, back and forth.

And that evening we—we went through a real day, and at the end of it we were at the DCM's house—we had a little reception with the business community. And they left. And he said, “What do you think?”

I said, “What do you think?”

He said, “Interesting.” He said, “You really can talk with these guys.”

I said, “I told you that.” I said, “I think you can cut a deal, Tom.”

And he said, “What's the deal?”

I said, “Well, the deal is very simple. You know, they're scared to death that we're going to come down on them. And we don't want these guys fiddling around in other countries. And we don't want to see them building up their armed force any bigger than it is. They're becoming a police state, and they're becoming a threat to everybody around. They've succeeded in giving their neighbors the jitters.” I said, “The deal, very simply, is they make a commitment to stop exporting revolution of any sort. And they contain their armed forces at a level we mutually agree to, which has to be in conformity with other armed forces in

the area." And they were all about, you know, 15,000, or 17,000. I said, "You know, you pick a number out of the hat."

"And we on our side, make a commitment that we will not mount any attack on them. In other words, a mutual security type of agreement."

He said, "I'll try it." So he went to see Ortega alone—Ortega wanted to see him alone. And he told him, he said, "Now, how does that sound?"

Ortega said, "I'll buy it."

So he left, and two days later I left. And I went to Europe for two weeks. Came back through Washington. And Tom had a tough time getting—he had committed himself to sending Ortega a draft of an agreement—something down on paper which could then be negotiated—something they would negotiate. And he had a devil of a time getting anything cleared, as you can imagine. Now, how much he knew about what we were starting to do, in terms of covert action—I don't know. I mean, Tom can speak to that. I don't know. I think it was in the wind then, and . . .

Q: The Contra . . .

PEZZULO: Yes. What he ended up putting on paper was damned insulting, and crass. When I looked at it, I said, "Holy crow." I mean, you know, "You're asking these people to close up shop and go away. I mean, it's a little strong. But maybe, you know, as a negotiating position, they can handle it. I think it's tough."

Well, they showed it to Arturo Cruz, who was then their ambassador to Washington, and he said, "This is an insult." Arturo is no hard-line man; I mean, he's a very reasonable man.

Well, Enders couldn't get anything through the administration in Washington, that resembled anything like the beginning of a negotiation. It was really an insulting attack.

Q: They just wanted the Sandinistas to disappear.

PEZZULO: Yes. I mean, that was clear that early, and it's still clear. I mean, what the Reagan administration has wanted for the past eight years was to have the Sandinistas disappear. They had this obsession that the Sandinistas were the cause of all problems in Central America. That the Sandinistas were a problem, there is no question. But they certainly were not at the core of all the problems in Central America. The Sandinistas, by coming into power as a revolutionary force, destabilized Central America. Their inflated rhetoric and their support to other guerrilla groups were destabilizing; no question. However, that was containable. But not by pursuing the Reagan administration's line.

What we've done in the process is turn this thing into some sort of a mindless crusade, where other people now question our sanity, including our allies in Europe; for a kind of a game that should have been played at a different level, with a different tone, with toughness, hardness with these guys, with Fidel Castro, with the Soviets. I think you had to talk tough turkey, and no fooling around. But you needed pros to do it, and not ideologues, and people who think diplomacy is rhetorical overkill.

I mean, we went from a careful, calculated attempt to move a revolutionary leadership a bit—to some sort of a circus. And that's deplorable. I mean, that to me is the end of diplomacy. You've moved from professionalism to a theatrical Hollywood spectacular. So now I don't know where you're going. I don't even know how you'd begin the dialogue anymore.

I was up at the Council (Council on Foreign Relations) last night, with a bunch of people—including Elliott Abrams. There's no way to begin this discussion anymore. And I went home just feeling, you know, where the hell do we go as a country anymore? I mean, I don't want to defend anybody. I don't mind looking at a problem; I'm not going to defend anybody. But I will look hard and honestly at reality, and I think I can do it as well as the next guy.

And that's what we need, you know, in diplomacy. We don't need brilliance, we need people who are willing to go in and deal with the facts, and work with the realities, and hopefully once in a while have an inspiration, or a little sense of something. We don't need this, this is embarrassing. We've become a Banana Republic.

And what it does is take the play away from what I would consider the art form of diplomacy, which I think is one of the more fascinating things you can do. This weird game of one-upmanship, and vindictive sparring is degrading. I really don't know—it takes us away from our strengths, as a people. I mean, our country was made by guys who knew how to move things. I mean, that's what this country was—you know, you brought people over here who came from countries that didn't have a break, and they knew how to cut a road, and they knew how to plant crops, and they knew how to do things. And half of them couldn't even speak well; it didn't matter. You know, they opened shops, and worked. They were doers. They were people that worked with their hands and raised families. It was not this blasted rhetorical baloney. I mean, we're turning . . .

Q: This is what they left behind in Europe.

PEZZULO: This is what they left behind; all the trappings, and all the phoniness. It turns your stomach. I mean, I found—last night—I haven't been that depressed in a long time. I went home last night, and I said, “Where do you go from here?” I mean, I'm not going to engage in that kind of stuff.

I wouldn't even hazard an honest comment to those people, because they're not dealing with the kinds of things which I think are fundamental to understand other societies and dealing with them. And that is, beginning with some sense of, you know, what makes them pulse; and where the other personalities fit into this. That's the intrigue to me.

You know, how these things fit together, and how you can move them, and shape them. And have them see where your—your country's interests, and your country's attitudes

can somehow find some common ground with theirs. I don't care whether you're talking to Israelis, or Jordanians, or Chileans, or whomever. If you can't reach that point of connection, there's nothing to talk about. If all I'm going to do is call you names, or say you're a good guy and go home, you don't need a diplomat. You can do this by telephone. (Laughs) Well, the end of that speech, but it's just deplorable.

One word about congressional relations, which I thought was a fascinating sort of accident I fell into. Because Bob McCloskey, who I went to work for in '74, suddenly became Assistant Secretary for Congressional Affairs, because Kissinger was upset with the then-incumbent, who was a former governor of Maryland—no, Virginia, I'm sorry. Bob had never done this kind of work, but Bob has a natural sense of public affairs, and dealing with people, and institutions. He's just a natural.

And I went in with him, and we really changed the composition of H, because H before was a little group of people who really didn't know much about the Foreign Service, and foreign policy. These were people that had come in for one reason or another over the last 15 years or so.

Q: H was the . . .

PEZZULO: Congressional Relations Office. But you had no substantive people in H, who knew anything about policy, or the concerns of the bureaus. So what we did was enlarge it, to bring people in from each of the geographic regions, and IO, EB, and so on. We brought in first-class officers to do congressional liaison. They came with substance and could relate to bureaus with substance. Then they could go out into Congress, which they didn't know, and start to feel their way. And pretty soon they could relate to the processes on the Hill because they were tied into the substance in the Department.

And they became instructors, really. Because the Foreign Service has a reluctance to deal with the Congress. Foreign Service Officers tend to be that way; they don't really see the Hill as their natural habitat. But once you make them understand that, you know, the way

a committee's behaving, or questions it's raising about whatever—the minute you start relating to them, and talking to them, and providing them with some insight into what's going on—you do reach a point, unless they're really antagonistic, where you satisfy their needs, and you know, further your own purposes.

So it was a very interesting period, and you get a sense of a branch of government, which is unique. And each congressman is, sort of, a private businessman. And they become—each one of them becomes somebody you've got to study a bit, to get them to move for you. And the committee processes, and these interminable discussions, and the torturous way bills move through the system—it's just another world.

But my point is, that the Foreign Service—and certainly people in the executive department—should be exposed to the Congress. Because without that, our country—especially on the foreign policy side—doesn't work. If you don't have something resembling bipartisanship—and you can see how the Contra issue has become such a mess, fundamentally because people just ignored what the opponents on the Hill were saying. They thought that the President could move Congress, and he can, but you pay a tremendously high cost. If you can't develop a consensus there, that this is the direction in which the United States should go, you're lost. You're just always going to be expending more energy trying to fight the case than it's worth. And you're going to lose the policy in the process. So I think it's fundamental, and it's fundamental to Foreign Service Officers.

And the last thing I'd like to say is that I really have—maybe it's old age—but I'm starting to get a real concern about where the Service is going. When I came in—at a period when the Foreign Service was, I thought, a glorious group of capable people; when you didn't have to say a hell of a lot to have people accept the fact that you had chosen a profession of quality. That was understood within the government; you just—it was true. There happened to be a little bit of snobbism, and elitism, which I never thought much of; but I think it goes with that other. But there was a sense of esprit in the organization.

I think it's gone through hard times, and I think when the Service forgets that—you don't have to reward people for good performance all the time, but you just can't cut them off at the knees and expect that kind of example not to be read for what it is within the Service. And I think things have happened in the last decade which have been deplorable. And you don't recoup easily. I mean, courage is tough to come by in any profession. It's a scarce commodity. And integrity is even scarcer. You just don't find that—you don't pay for it, you don't build it overnight. And that's exactly what you need; you need courage and integrity in FSO's.

Because the Foreign Service does not have a big constituency. It doesn't have a big budget, with a lot of goodies out there that you can sell to Congress. And it's always fighting the kind of things—or presenting the kinds of issues that people in Washington—particularly your political leaders—don't want to hear. So you've got to be better than everybody else, to make the case; you've just got to be better. It's not a question of—you don't have anything else, but integrity and quality to go up and say, “Look, this is the way it is. I'm not saying it's good, bad, or indifferent. This is the way it is. And these are the kinds of things we're going to have to face. You know, we're going to have to make the best of four lousy choices here. And this is the least lousy.”

And then you're going to have to understand that those are the kinds of things that are pressures to whatever administration—whoever walks into that White House. But once you start cutting it in a way that people become echoes of whatever they think the top guy is doing . . . As I say, this may be a little bit of old age, and I don't deny that. But I just think it's deplorable to see people who can't sit down and be honest about what's going on. And the minute you lose the honesty of your sense of what is happening in a country, and how the United States should be relating to it, then the rest goes with it. End of sermon.

Q: All right. Thanks very much.

PEZZULO: Not at all.

Q: It's been very, very interesting, I must say.

End of interview